

HOW CITIES MUST EVOLVE TO STRENGTHEN URBAN RESILIENCE

As climate change tops the list of threats to urban resilience, Lauren Sorkin, Executive Director, Resilient Cities Network, says it is time for cities to once again rise to the challenge



The urban environment faces a series of global challenges. But whether that is climate change, creating an equitable society, or protecting vulnerable communities, it is becoming clear that our cities can evolve to offer the most effective leadership in response to these issues.

We work with cities around the world that are committed to building and investing in urban resilience. Each one has set out a strategy identifying the systemic challenges it will face in the coming decades and the assets that will support its evolution. Infrastructure and the built environment are important subsets of those assets.

Cities manage waste systems, water systems, school systems, local roads and mobility, giving them the power to influence change. Perhaps more than anything, this underscores the fact that cities are systems, not silos. So, it is crucial that a city's strategy and investment decisions enhance urban resilience in order to strengthen the interconnection between all systems.

To achieve urban resilience, governance is key. While there may be many players at the helm of city leadership – mayors, governors, municipal commissioners – this is where resilience building must be effectuated. Local leaders understand the needs of their community, so are best suited to guide resilience-building efforts.

Resilience must also be about people: our cities are built by and for people. We have to understand where our vulnerable communities are, and the triggers that might weaken the social fabric.

Where there is deliberate work to develop integrated communities, there is more resilience. This creates a more secure place for investment. The Singaporean Government, for example, has for many years built affordable housing to ensure all ethnic

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groups are integrated proportionately in all communities.

Supporting communities extends to strengthening ecosystems such as small and medium enterprises. For example, in Oakland, California, part of the pandemic response from the resilience team was to target philanthropic payments to help bolster minority-owned small businesses.

A resilient approach by cities pays dividends when it comes to attracting investment. Take the city of Norfolk, Virginia, in the US, which has a high degree of flooding risk and is reliant on the economy from its naval base. After putting in place a resilience strategy to address sustainability, climate change and sea-level risk in its long-term financial and capital planning, Norfolk's S&P credit rating was upgraded to AAA.

The pandemic has shown that digital infrastructure is critical, and cities have responded. As part of its post-pandemic strategy, Milan has said it is possible for the government to manage a larger part of the digital infrastructure to facilitate communications and data transmission.

Real estate players have a huge role in supporting cities to become more resilient. The most aware industry actors take a district level approach as they think about future development.

Our cities have changed as a result of the pandemic and a local approach is now more important. The shift to home working, for example, gives real estate the opportunity to develop options for residential and commercial spaces that are flexible, inclusive and more integrated into the community. There are critical sustainability and resilience elements advanced in this type of strategy.

Our aim is a holistic approach. By understanding the complexity of cities, we can reduce and help prevent the impact of shocks and stresses on a city's people, economy and physical environment, and improve quality of life.

This is something we all need to be engaged in. Resilience-building strategies send a clear signal to all potential investors and stakeholders that says: "We are addressing our challenges head on."

The Resilient Cities Network brings together funding, knowledge and partnerships to help cities around the world build a safe, equitable and sustainable future

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